Describing the Water

Prologue

Three rows from the front I sat, about six rows of people behind me. The family had intended to keep it a small affair; I can't say it felt that intimate. Head down, head down, was the order of play for me. I lie. I occasionally looked up at the speaker, maybe, just maybe, my eyes would fall slightly to the right of the speaker – behind him to the right. Such an odd thing to look at. Bright pink it was, with graphics of flowers and pictures printed on the side.

The speaker continued, in the usual fashion, from beginning to end as you'd expect. A few jokes – of course, now's the time to laugh. I was carrying a lot of attitude that day, but hey, a young man telling an old person to 'take their time' in a sarcastic tone as they breeze past them in a garden centre is pretty funny. My dad followed the speaker, recounted some old memories that people had shared with him, and he did alright to be fair. I was asked if I'd like to say something, but I couldn't think of anything at the time.

To keep moving forward is the advice I first got. My father said to me shortly after that day, 'each day that goes by is a day closer to feeling better'. The following week I had the feeling I wanted to study again and go to university, though the deadline for entry had long passed. Fortunately for me, a family member was friends with the principal at a local university. And so, after sending a few documents to the correct people, I had my place at university sorted. Just one summer of working laid ahead of me – then I was a student again. Matthew Arnold once said, 'The very desire to see things as they are implies a balance and regulation of mind which is not often attained without fruitful effort'. I was willing to put in the fruitful effort.

Chapter 1

My sister got home around 4:30pm, panicked and bleary eyed. I hadn't moved since speaking to my father when he left with Mum at precisely 3.06pm. Only a few hours earlier, I had been lying upside down on my bed staring listlessly into our turquoise garden shed, thinking about what Mum might make for dinner that night.

So we drove to the hospital that evening, our first visit of many, to see the coma they had put him in; I played some upbeat music through the car stereo – I can't recall what channel it was. We waited half an hour to get into the carpark. Half-an-hour. All we could do was sit in traffic and stare at the hospital. I found myself playing a game, trying to work out where in the hospital building my brother might be. The big A&E sign in bold red writing was a bit of a giveaway, but I kept my eyes skirting around it as to keep the game going.

We parked in the central carpark. The A&E entrance was separate from the main entrance and required a walk, longer than I'd liked, alongside the perimeter of the main building. Through double doors we entered a vestibule space and followed the red placard signs, 'Critical Inpatients', posted at the head of the doors to our right. As we turned the corner, there was Mum and Dad seated together. It wasn't the thought of seeing seriously ill people, or perhaps the thought of seeing large quantities of blood, that made me feel so uncomfortable, as I had imagined, it was seeing my mother and father sat there. We were standing just outside an emergency room. Dad pointed out that he was through that door. I walked up to the door and peered through the square, glass window. I could see him, eyes closed, tube from the mouth, torso ever so peacefully and slowly expanding, followed by the slow exhalation. At this point I felt my mother's breath on my shoulder. Time had relaxed. She held my arm. I turned

around. We hugged. A few moments passed in this embrace and then she took a step back. She looked at me – my heart sped up.

Chapter 2

After three days of lying intubated, my brother received some bad news. His lead doctor, Dr Graeme, arranged a meeting with the whole, immediate, family. I should have known at the time that these kinds of meetings are a red flag. But being naïve and young, I rather thought things were going relatively well. The meeting with Dr Graeme lasted only about fifteen minutes.

Feeling quite hungry we searched the hospital for a place to grab some food; our usual place, the M&S at the main entrance, had become too high profile for the sombre mood we found ourselves in. We headed upstairs instead, to the top floor, where we had been led to believe was a restaurant type café that served hot food. It was open but no longer serving hot food, so we settled for four waters. I'd completely spaced on the time; I think it was around midnight. My sister and father headed home shortly thereafter, but me and Mum chose to stay for a bit longer. The intensive care unit was at the lowest point in the hospital, below the ground floor – minus one on the lift. I'd never been a fan of lifts, for the whole week I'd been using the stairs, but I was pretty tired and wasn't prepared to go with that spritely rational voice that wishes to take no risks at all.

We spent a couple of hours that night sitting with my brother. I found the place to be quite peaceful. You look to your left, a couple of patients sleeping – you look to your right, a few more patients sleeping. They all seemed peaceful to me. In a deep sleep, dreaming. Individual personalities with their own unique set of memories – were they thinking how they might get back to the place where those memories existed?

Chapter 3

I should say now that my brother did wake up, only a couple of days after that meeting with Dr Graeme. It had surprised Dr Graeme. I can only really remember a few exact things I said to my brother whilst he was in the coma. I partially remember trying to be creative with the pictures I tried to paint. A mix of aspirational but attainable scenarios the future could hold if he would wake up. My brother didn't say whether he heard anything whilst he was in the coma, and it wasn't worth asking.

My brother, before his accident, was living on his own, about five minutes from where the rest of us lived. It took him a day to find his voice again, but the subject of moving home soon became his priority – wanting to come home and join the rest of us like the good old days. We all promised that would be the case.

My brother became very sleepy and spent most days not opening his eyes or speaking to anyone. The doctor suggested he might be clinically depressed; from all the trauma he'd been through. Any talking I did this time just annoyed my brother, and so, we spent a lot of that week just contemplating in silence.

Chapter 4

My brother spent three weeks in the Gastroenterology and Liver Ward after making it out of the intensive care unit. The hospital at this time decided it would be best to move him to a different hospital – one that specialised in renal support. The new hospital was much closer to home, so we moved out of the small apartment we had been renting. As a family, we would take it in turns to stay the night with my brother – he didn't like to be left alone, which is understandable.

I woke up late one morning to find I was the only one at home. I travelled to the hospital by myself around midday in the car. I had only recently passed my license, but I wasn't a nervous driver at the time. I walked through the hospital doors with a quiet happiness, prepared to get my brother going again; just the day previous we had managed to get him walking unaided for the first time since the accident. He was very malnourished and the fluid on his legs had made it very difficult for him to walk. But he would try his best to walk for us, believing that his inability to move was the only thing standing in the way of coming home finally.

As I was about to enter the ward, I was stopped by my father who came up from behind me. He told me to go to the family visiting room. He would follow behind. I didn't get much thinking time in that short walk, but there had been a handful of moments like this already. Each time I walked into a mini conference I'd somewhat intellectually prepared myself for the worst news. I looked at my mother sitting down; she couldn't tell me anything. Dad did all the explaining – and well – I could hear my sister calling my name from outside the room. She then entered.

"Charlie wants to see you."

Charlie's the name of my brother. I glanced at Mum to check – I got all I needed from her shrug and so, I turned back out of the room and took a right into the ward. I walked past the blue hospital curtains concealing each patient in floating square-shaped units until I arrived at my brother's. I pulled at his curtain. He was wide awake and pointing for me to sit in the chair next to him.

As time passed that afternoon, I remember spontaneously standing up every now and then, pretending to get something from the bedside desk that stood behind him. And would just stay there in silence for a few minutes staring at the top of my brother's head. He'd soon get annoyed and tell me to sit back down. I

don’t remember much of the next few days, regardless of how hard I try, I couldn’t tell you how he came to be in a hospice a week later.

Chapter 5

I woke up one morning, around 12:30pm. I could vaguely hear the conversation my mother was having over the phone.

She called into my bedroom, “Rachel and Michael are at the hospice, Charlie wants to see you.”

I answered back, in an unenthusiastic tone, “tell her, I might come up soon.”

By the time I arrived at the hospice that evening, my brother was no longer talking, no longer voluntarily moving, no longer seeing – and only perhaps for a little longer could he hear. I pushed a chair next to the bed, to be facing my brother directly. Slowly my head fell and rested against the bed; I continued to watch in silence until I fell asleep.

I was awoken around 4:30am by a lady in blue. She got a sense from the still, white covers – ok, thank you – so I walked around the bed to sit next to mother, rested my arm on her shoulder, that was that; and to be kind, I packed the nebuliser away.

Epilogue

And thus, the fruits of my labour.

END